

15 February 1955

BACKGROUND

THE "LOST PROVINCES" OF LAOS

- I. The two provinces (which, under the Geneva Agreements form "area of concentration pending a political settlement" for the Pathet Lao puppet regime) are: (a) Houa Phan (provincial capital--San Neua) in the northeast, with a border in common with Tonkin, and (b) a zone in the northwest, known by the French as the "5th Military Territory" (provincial capital--Phong Saly), with a border in common with both China and Tonkin.
- A. Even by Laotian standards (total population 1.3 million in Laos' 91,400 sq. mi., or 15 per sq. mi.), these two provinces are comparatively barren of people.
- B. Population of Houa Phan--63,000. Area: 6,300 sq. mi. Density: 10 per sq mi. Population of capital, Sam Neua: "under 20,000." (probably 3,000). (No hotel)
- C. Population of "5th Mil. Terr."--46,000. Area: 6,100 sq. mi. Density: 5 per sq. mi. Pop. of capital, Phong Saly: 2,800. (No hotel)
- II. Historically, these two provinces, together with the neighboring northern province of Luang Prabang, constitute the ancient (14th Century) "Kingdom of Lan Xang": Royal family (originally Thai people from southwest China) was left in nominal control of the northern "kingdom" when the French took Laos in 1893.

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- 2 -

- A. French always exercised direct rule over remaining 8 southern provinces of Laos (which formerly constituted two "principalities" of Vientiane and Bassac, under rule of Lan Xang cadets).
- B. When Laos was given constitution by French in '47, the northern royal house (headed by Sisavang Vong) was confirmed in its position as "supreme chief of state" in Laos.

III. Several local products of high value and low bulk add to the politico-economic importance of the area.

- A. Much of Laos' annual opium product (50-60 tons) is grown in the two provinces.
- B. Houa Phan is the major world source of benzoin, a medicinal oil.
- C. The area is also a source of sticklac, a form of shellac.
- D. Rich mineral resources remain unexploited, ^(ALTHOUGH) some gold is mined.

IV. Terrain of northern provinces tends to limit political control.

- A. Phong Saly is joined to main centers of Laos by river valleys, but principal arteries of communication are rivers strewn with rapids, navigable only by native dugouts; terrain is wild and mountainous.

- 3 -

- B. Houa Phan is even less accessible from Laos owing to a formidable mountain barrier; instead its natural outlets are toward Tonkin.
- V. Climate is generally pleasant, with freezing temperatures during dry season (December-June); torrential rains during the remainder of the year largely preclude surface transportation.
- VI. Mixed character of population presents political problem.
 - A. Picture is one of Laotian rule imposed on population which is mixture of racial groups having little in common.
 - B. Major non-Laotian groups are Thais and Meos.
 - C. Peacetime geographic separation of ethnic groups tended to assume vertical as well as horizontal pattern: Laotians in the plains and plateaus, Thais on the slopes of the mountains, opium-growing Meos at the peaks.
 - D. Wartime and postwar upheavals have further scrambled population.
 - 1. Viet Minh incursions into Laos resulted in migration of Thais from Vietnam into Laos, and of both Thais and Meos out of Houa Phan province into Free Laos.